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CONTROL OF URBAN BLACKBIRD AND STARLING ROOSTS

BY

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INTRODUCTION

Blackbirds and starlings often establish large fall and winter roosts in areas where their presence is objectionable because of potential health, economic, and/or nuisance problems. Roosts of more than a million birds are not uncommon. Red-winged blackbirds (Agelaius phoeniceus), common grackles (Quiscalus quiscula), brown-headed cowbirds (Molothrus ater), and starlings (Sturnus vulgaris) make up most of the roost populations.

Methods have been developed to reduce blackbird/starling populations by various means. However, lethal control is seldom the answer to urban bird roost problems. It is possible to move the birds from an established roost, and this is sometimes the only solution to a particular urban roost problem.

METHODS OF DISPERSAL

There are a number of tools or ways to cause the dispersal of an established blackbird/starling roost. The use of noise-making, scaring devices is, no doubt, the most popular and effective of the tools. Other frightening devices and habitat manipulation are also important in dispersing roosts. As with other animal damage control programs, these techniques tend to be more effective when used collectively rather than individually.

Recorded Distress and Alarm Calls

Distress and alarm calls of starlings and blackbirds have been used singly and in conjunction with other scare devices to successfully move roosts. They are available on records and tapes. The calls should be played back on mobile sound equipment in the roost intermittently for 10 to 15 seconds each minute as the birds attempt to enter or continuously when most birds have entered the roost.

Gas-operated Exploders

These devices, operating on acetylene or propane gas, are designed to produce loud explosions at controllable intervals. They should be placed (elevated above the vegetation, if possible)
in high bird use areas of the roost and set to fire at no
greater than 30-second intervals. Since birds are known to
easily habituate to exploders, it is best to move the exploders
about during the scaring operation and/or combine their use with
other scare devices. Exploders can be left in the roost after
dispersal is completed to discourage birds from returning.

Explo__ing Shotgu__n Shells

These devices know as shellcrackers or scare cartridges
are 12-gauge shotgun shells containing a firecracker which is
projected into the air about 300 feet before exploding. The
shells should be fired so that they will explode in front of
or underneath flocks of birds attempting to enter the roost.
The purpose is to produce an explosion between the birds and
the roost site. Each shooter should be given an ample supply
of shells (50 or more rounds) and cautioned to conserve ammu-
nition. The last few minutes that birds are moving is a critical
period when the firepower is most needed.

Noise Bombs/Whistle Bombs/Racket Bombs

These devices are fired from a 15 mm flare pistol. Noise
bombs (also called bird bombs or clown bombs) are firecrackers
that travel about 75 feet before exploding. They should be
used similarly to the exploding shotgun shells. Whistle bombs
are similar to noise bombs, but do not explode. They produce a
noticeable response just prior to darkness because of the trail
of smoke and fire as well as the whistling sound. Racket bombs
make noise in flight but do not explode.

Protechnics

A variety of pyrotechnic devices including firecrackers,
rockets, and Roman candles are available for dispersing birds.
Firecrackers can be inserted into slow-burning fuse ropes to
control the timing of the explosions. The interval between
explosions is determined by the rate at which the rope burns and
the spacing of the firecrackers.

Visual Scaring Devices

Flashing lights, owl decoys, and helium-filled balloons have
all been used as scaring devices. Their effectiveness is en-
hanced when they are used in conjunction with auditory scare
devices such as recorded distress calls or exploding devices.

Habitat Manipulation

Thinning roost vegetation, thereby making it less attractive
to birds, often produces longer term results than using scaring
devices. When feasible the roost vegetation should be thinned
to discourage any rebuild-up of bird numbers after a dispersal program. Vegetation thinning, however, is not a permanent solution. In a few years the vegetation will again become dense and provide attractive roosting habitat.

In pine plantations proper thinning is actually a good timber management practice, besides making the area less attractive to birds. The vegetation at deciduous roost sites is often not of sufficient economic value to create any objection to removing it by bulldozing. However, if the roost has Histoplasma capsulatum, a disease producing soil fungus, soil disturbance should be avoided.

PROCEDURES TO DISPERSE A ROOST

Before beginning dispersal efforts, inform local residents near the roost of the planned operation to avoid any apprehension on their part. Work with local authorities so they can assist in the dispersal program and provide for spectator safety and traffic control.

Begin scaring as soon as possible after a roost develops. Generally, the longer a roost is established, the more difficult it is to disperse.

Begin scaring as soon as the birds begin arriving at the roost in the evening. This requires that all personnel and equipment are ready before the first birds arrive in the evening. Once birds are in the cover of the roost vegetation, especially after dark, they are extremely difficult to force to leave. Therefore, continuing scaring efforts after dark is pointless and sometimes harmful because the birds may habituate to the stimuli. Using scaring devices in the morning (one-half hour before normal roost departure) as well as in the evening may speed up roost dispersal.

Be persistent. Population reduction is often not noticeable the first or second night. Scaring often needs to be continued for four or more nights before the birds abandon the roost.

Use a combination of scaring devices. Although birds have been dispersed using one device, different devices often complement each other and make the dispersal effort easier.

Cover the entire roost in the dispersal effort. The number of personnel and the amount of equipment required depends on the size and type of roost and may change each night in response to bird movement. Normally one person shooting shellcrakers or with a hand-held speaker for playing distress calls can adequately patrol 1 to 2 acres of roosting habitat.
Very little emphasis has been put on finding out where birds go once they are dispersed from a roost. Understandably, some birds may move to nearby areas where they continue to be a problem. If so, an effort should be made to move them from these areas also. Once birds have been moved from one site they usually become more responsive to dispersal efforts and moving them another time is rather easy.

Safety Precautions

Special care should be taken when using any of the pyrotechnic devices and firearms, Safety goggles and ear protectors should be worn when using any of these devices. When firing the exploding shotgun shells the shooter should inspect the gun barrel after each shot for wadding that sometimes jams. The use of non-choked or open bore shotguns will help to eliminate this problem. A ramrod (wood dowel) should be carried to remove the wadding if jamming occurs. Use single-shot break open guns to facilitate inspection and cleaning of accumulated powder residue. When using noise or whistle bombs, the flare pistol should be fired at arm's length to avoid any close-to-the-face explosions. When using the flare pistol, hold the thumb in front of the hammer until ready to fire.

Persons using pyrotechnic devices and exploding shells should be aware of their potential fire danger. Extreme care should be used near buildings or when vegetation is dry. Firefighting equipment should be available at the scene if conditions warrant.

Live ammunition should be used sparingly during roost dispersal efforts because of the additional hazards to personnel and the possibility of killing protected bird species sometimes found roosting with blackbirds and starlings. Additionally, crippled birds may actually tend to decoy birds into the roost. Use of live ammunition should be restricted to police department personnel.

Personnel working in or around bird roosts should take certain precautions against exposure to the respiratory disease, histoplasmosis. This is especially true for roosts in the central and eastern portions of the United States where the fungus *Bistoplasma capsulatum* is most common. The disease is contracted by inhaling spores or fargments of this fungus, and the soil conditions in older roosts favor its growth.

A face mask or self-contained breathing apparatus and protective clothing, including coveralls, gloves, caps and rubber boots should be worn. Soiled clothing should 'be plastic-bagged immediately on leaving the roost and washed as soon as possible.
Rubber boots should be cleaned before entering vehicles to prevent heater fan circulation of spores. These precautions are especially important when bulldozing a roost site. The disturbance of the soil can cause large amounts of spores or fungus fragments to become airborne.